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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MIXED COMMENTARY ON NAZIF VISIT TO WASHINGTON:
EGYPTIAN MEDIA THEMES, MAY 16 TO 22

1. Headlines: President Mubarak's visit with Libyan leader Moamar Gaddafi and other African leaders to discuss Darfur May 17 - 18 was widely covered, as was Mubarak's May 17 statement encouraging Egyptians to get out and vote on the constitutional amendment referendum on May 25. Mubarak met May 21 with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Sharm El Sheikh, with statements of both leaders urging Israel to "apply the Sharm understandings" covered in Egyptian newspapers. The publication by a UK tabloid of Saddam Hussein in his underwear received front-page coverage the weekend of May 20-21, as did Afghan President Hamid Karzai's call for the USG to investigate allegations that soldiers tortured to death two Afghani prisoners, as reported in the New York Times on May 20. End headlines.

2. Nazif goes to Washington: PM Nazif's meeting with President Bush at the White House on May 18 was reported enthusiastically by pro-government newspapers and TV, highlighting President Bush's praise for Egypt's "historic reform initiative," ongoing U.S. economic assistance to Egypt, and the "strong relations" between Egypt and the U.S. Commentary about Nazif's visit, however, was mixed. While pro-government and conservative commentators praised the visit, the opposition and independents seized on Nazif's "insulting" remarks to USA Today on May 15 that democratic reform in Egypt would "take some time, because [opposition] parties are not yet mature enough." Much of the commentary on Nazif's remarks was moderate in tone, with critics charging that Nazif had made a "mistake" -- save for opposition Al Wafd (circulation: 180,000), which used more strident language throughout the week to criticize Nazif's remarks to his "American masters."

3. Opposition's boycott of referendum on Article 76: "Egyptians should stay home on the day of national mourning!" was the banner headline in Al Wafd on May 21, as the newspaper continued its ongoing media campaign against the May 25 referendum on a constitutional amendment. On May 22, all newspapers reported on the Shura Council's retort to the opposition's planned boycott, stating that it was "political weakness and an attempt to gain the limelight." A pro-government commentator who appeared on Egyptian TV Channel One's program "Halat Hiwar" ("State of the Discussion") on May 22 described the opposition's boycott as displaying "a complete lack of understanding about how democracy works." Notable was the amount of commentary in the Egyptian media about the boycott and the opposition's motives, compared to the paucity of discussion about the referendum itself.

4. Ruby's latest video: The newest music video by Egyptian pop star Ruby, "Ib'a Abilni" ("Meet Me"), can now be seen (repeatedly) in Cairo's cafes and clubs. (Note: Most cafes and clubs that cater to young people in Cairo have a TV set turned on to an Arabic video channel. End note.) In the video, Ruby dances provocatively in Pharonic costumes. A chorus of conservative Ruby critics claim the singer has "overstepped the line" by insulting Egyptian culture and heritage, according to pan-Arab news website "Al Bawaba" on May 19. Ruby's response? She claims to portray the Pharaohs' "humanistic side," aiming to show her audience that ancient Egyptian civilization "celebrated the pleasures of life."

GRAY